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ABSTRACT

Decision makers must address the issues of (1) just what are electronic communications? (2) how will they help me teach, administer, or survive? and (3) what will it cost in time and money? Electronic mail allows the sending of letters, memos, and messages to anyone who uses the same electronic mail system, and provides most of the options that are available through the traditional post office, including registered, bulk, and express mail. Perhaps the greatest advantage of electronic mail, however, is the informal, telegraphic writing style that is customary. Other forms of electronic communication include electronic bulletin boards and computer conferences. Hooking up with an electronic mail system requires equipment (a microcomputer or terminal, modem, interface, and cable); software (a smart or dumb terminal); and an electronic mail system with which to connect. System options include The Source, SpecialNet, Compuserve, DIALCom, and local networks. Each electronic mail system charges for membership, amount of time spent in using the system, and telephone line rental. The best bet for deciding on which electronic mail system to use is to find one used by colleagues. (LMM)

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Electronic Mail

by Jim Pollard & Don Holznagel

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

As a decision maker, you know that the world is different this year from what it was last year; that change has become exponential; and that you have little chance of keeping up. During the first years of this decade, popular enthusiasm and anxiety were focused on the effect of the microcomputer on life in general and on the schools in particular. This year, the topic to discuss is electronic communications. Some of you are not comfortable, even in a social setting, without an "electronic address" to share or a hot tip on a new "bulletin board." This report looks at a small portion of the world of electronic communications, intending to help you to decide whether to exchange time and money for a piece of that world.

It might be helpful to begin with an overview of the environment. The term electronic communications covers virtually every form of interaction between computers. It includes the transfer of data between main frame (i.e. big) computers and the transfer of gossip between hobbyists using microcomputers. It includes the sending and receiving of mail electronically; the long distance use of one computer by several terminals; the posting of news on specialized "bulletin boards"; and the searching and reading of huge stores of information known as data bases. It even includes the raiding and plundering of secret computer files, but that topic is already well-covered in print and film.

The issues that you will need to address as a decision maker are (1) just what are electronic communications, (2) how will they help me teach, administer or survive, and (3) what will it cost in time and money. These are the issues with which this report deals.

WHAT'S ELECTRONIC MAIL?

Let's begin with electronic correspondence. If you already have a good concept of how mail works, you have electronic mail nearly mastered. Using a typical electronic mail system, you can send letters, memos and messages to anyone who uses the same electronic mail system. Unlike the usual mail, the letters arrive at their destination immediately. All the addressee needs to do to read the letter you sent is to "sign on" to the system (a process which usually involves a password to protect confidentiality) and to read the letter.

Most of the options which are available with the post office are also available with electronic mail. These options include registered mail, bulk mail, and express mail. Your letter can even be delayed intentionally until the date that you want it to arrive. An important feature of electronic mail is the ability to send one letter to a list of addressees. A letter to fifty of your

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closest colleagues takes the same amount of time to mail as a letter to one of them. Most systems will store frequently used address lists for you, and some will even transfer your letter to mailgrams or even regular mail if some of the people on the list are not connected to the system.

Perhaps the greatest advantage to electronic mail is the informal, telegraphic style of writing which is customary. Suppose you need information from a principal in Middletown, Indiana, in planning your next year's budget. Your original letter would be very much like a letter you would send through regular mail. The response, however, would contain only the minimal information necessary... "It would cost us $13,007 for three of those." Your reply to the principal might be a simple "Thanks." By regular mail, standard practice would require constructing at least two paragraphs of text for each of the latter two messages, not because two paragraphs were necessary, but because that's what would look best on a printed page. If for no other reason than this telegraphic style of communicating, electronic mail should win your heart.

WHAT'S A BULLETIN BOARD?

While you are using electronic mail, you will probably have an opportunity to use another type of electronic communication, bulletin boards. This form of communication is exactly parallel to the actual bulletin board you might find in a school or laundromat. You post notices on the board or read those that are already posted. Keep in mind that everybody who uses the system will be able to read what you have posted.

As electronic mail systems grow, the bulletin boards tend to be split into specialized boards, so finding what someone has to say about, for example effective reading programs, might require looking on the Reading bulletin board. These boards are a good way to look for the answer to a particular problem you are having. Simply post a message indicating that you need help with that problem and ask what solutions others have found. Respondents may either post their solution or send their reply to your electronic mailbox.

CONFERENCE BY COMPUTER?

A final option you will be offered by many electronic mail systems is to chat with other folks using the system at that particular moment. This can be arranged in advance among several of your colleagues, resulting in a computer conference. You'll have to work out the rules of etiquette at the beginning of the conference since participants tend to either interrupt each other or sit silently at their terminals.

WHAT ABOUT HOOKING UP?

Getting hooked up with an electronic mail system requires some equipment, some software and an electronic mail system to hook to. The equipment is:

a microcomputer (or a terminal; if you already have a terminal, that's all the equipment you need) -- $100 to $2500

a modem (the gizmo which connects your computer to the telephone) $60 to $250

an interface and cable (to connect your computer to the modem--some modems connect directly to the computer so you may be able to do without this) $100 to $150

The software is needed in order to convince your computer that it is a terminal. It can be either a dumb terminal--one which sends and receives information; or a smart terminal--one which does what a dumb terminal does but also saves information it receives on a disk and sends out files which have been stored on disk. In general, smart terminals are better than dumb terminals. The software should cost you less than $100

So, with the equipment in place, with whom can you communicate? You can communicate with anyone who uses the same electronic mail system that you use. You, of course want to use the same system as the one used by those colleagues you want to communicate with. Your options include:

The Source--This is a general purpose system which has electronic mail, bulletin boards and news on hundreds of subjects. With the source you can check the stock market, make an airline reservation, read the newspaper and, incidentally, keep abreast of what is happening in education. News on education is supplied through Edline, a bulletin board service which is operated by the Council of Chief State School Officers. If much of your communication will be with state level educators through out the country, this is the system to choose. (The Source Telephone: 800/323-1717).

SpecialNet--The National Association of State Directors of Special Education started this service a couple of years ago as a mechanism for their members to communicate and to receive the latest federal news on Special Ed. Since its beginning, the membership has broadened to include hundreds of school district and even building level administrators. SpecialNet's specialized bulletin boards are well managed and informative. Many states have started subnetworks on SpecialNet for school districts to communicate among themselves. (SpecialNet Telephone: 202/822-7933).

Compuserve--This system is very much like The Source--in fact they are in direct competition. The National School Boards Association chose Compuserve as the system that they would use communicating among themselves. An attraction of Compuserve is a relatively low cost to educators who use the system. (Compuserve Telephone: 800/848-8119).

DIALCOM--Is an electronic mail system which is operated by a corporation which specializes in computer time rental. The cost is low. It is not widely used by local educators but it is used by the Federal Department of Education and National Institute of Education. (DIALCOM Telephone: 301/588-1572).

Local networks--It may be that there is a local group of educators who communicate among themselves on their own system. The people in Alaska use their own system, the Alaska Electronic Mail Service, which connects communities which spend much of the year not connected. Other states use their own computers or use an existing system like SpecialNet. A call to your State Department of Education should help you locate any local system in your state.

Each electronic mail system will charge a membership fee and will bill for the actual amount of time you spend using the system in a month. The best advice is to check with colleagues concerning which system they use and approximately what they pay each month to use it. Expect to pay somewhere around $500 per year for moderate use of an electronic mail and bulletin board system.

Unfortunately, there is yet another charge you will face in using electronic mail--the telephone. Assuming that the computer which houses the electronic mail system is not in your town, there will be costs to rent the telephone lines. The costs are lower than you might expect thanks to companies which rent the lines at a lower rate because they handle a large volume of traffic. If you are in a medium to large city, you can share in their savings by dialing a local number and having your call included in the volume. Even if you are not in a city served by one of these companies, it is probably less expenive to make a toll call to the nearest city which is served than to make a direct call. The major companies providing this service are Uninet, Telenet and Tymnet.

The initial impression of the usefulness of electronic mail may bring visions of the glory days of CB radio, where thousands of users hit the airwaves to discuss, primarily, their CB radios. It is true that some networks specialize in exchanges among computer hobbyists, so you will have to shop carefully if you want to avoid trading tips on playing Zork with a high school student in Beowawe, NV.

The best bet for deciding on which electronic mail system to use is to find some of your colleagues already using one. Even if they are not totally delighted with the system they are using, you should give that system serious consideration. Without someone to mail things to, you won't find electronic mail particularly useful. If you are pioneering in your area, you might get some help from a professional association in your field. It is to everyone's advantage to be using the same system.

As with many aspects of the information age, the number of options can be bewildering. If the rapid change in the way we communicate is depressing you, there is one final option available through electronic mail. Dr. Del Dobyns, a clinical psychologist, offers small group sessions on Monday evenings. Just dial up CompuServe and sign on to the group.

If you have any questions about Electronic Mail, please call Jim Pollard at (503) 248-6800 Ext: 542 or leave a message for AEC043 on The Source.

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